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# **Challenging the gendered rhetoric of success? The limitations of women-only mentoring for tackling gender inequality in the workplace**

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## **Abstract**

Mentoring is widely acknowledged to be an important contributor to women's career success and progression but women often struggle to access mentoring networks that can help sponsor and develop their careers. Formal mentoring programmes designed specifically for women help overcome this challenge, but such schemes may at the same time reinforce masculine discourses which position women as deficient in relation to the invisibly male norm that is implicit within contemporary working practices. Drawing on a formal women-only mentoring programme built on gender-positive goals to empower women to 'be the best they can be' within the events industry, this paper considers the extent to which such programmes can both challenge and reproduce gendered discourses of business and success. Interviews with mentors and mentees illustrate how such programmes make gender visible within business and individual careers, but masculinist underpinnings of organisational discourses remain invisible, unacknowledged and thus largely unchallenged.

**Keywords:** events; gender fatigue; gender neutrality; paradox; mentoring; women.

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## Introduction

Forty years after the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act rendered direct and indirect discrimination against women unlawful in the UK, gender inequalities in the workplace persist. The gender pay gap remains at 9.4% for full time employees (ONS, 2016) and workforces continue to be segregated horizontally and vertically. However, many people believe gender inequality has been substantially reduced, if not eliminated, and a discourse of gender neutrality and gender blindness is seen as more progressive and appropriate in business settings (Lewis, 2006). Gender discrimination has become less overt than was the case in earlier periods, neutralising some of the political and popular will to tackle inequality and rendering it invisible to many. Undeniable outcomes of gender discrimination, such as pay differences and the shortage of women on boards, are rationalised as remnants of historic social patterns that can be rectified by policy interventions rather than wholesale re-evaluation of the norms, discourses and practices that construct understandings of 'work', 'workplace' and 'worker'.

The ways in which organisations, jobs, workplaces and practices are structured and conducted are based around implicit and generally unnoticed masculine norms that render female workers as 'other'; different and ultimately lacking in relation to the ideal (masculine) model (Acker, 1990; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Williams et al., 2012). The underpinning masculinist discourse of business deploys gender attributes to define what and who is deemed 'successful' in the workplace, and these attributes invariably, but usually invisibly, construct the ideal worker as male (Bruni et al., 2004). Persistent gender stereotypes make it difficult, but not impossible, for women to live up to this ideal (Heilman, 2000), but the unacknowledged presence of this masculinist standard makes gender inequality hard for many people to recognise, identify and thus challenge.

Mentoring programmes are an example of an initiative which may be used to try to dismantle persistent fragments of the glass ceiling and enable more women to progress to senior management positions. Mentoring has been shown to be beneficial for both men and women in securing improved career outcomes, with those who have been mentored consistently outperforming those who have not, even long after the mentoring relationship has ended (Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997). Formal mentoring is believed to be particularly important for women in overcoming gendered barriers (Elliott et al., 2011). Women mentored by senior figures may gain access to important networks, knowledge and opportunities that will enhance their career progression (Ramaswami et al., 2010). However, although women can gain substantially from being mentored and are as likely as men to take up mentoring opportunities, men are more likely to secure promotions as a result (Ibarra et al., 2010). Therefore, access to mentoring alone may not be enough to overcome insidious

gender discrimination that limits the career opportunities of many women as the belief in gender neutrality of the workplace remains intact and gendered structures, norms and discourses unchallenged.

Female mentoring programmes, as with women's leadership programmes more generally, may fail to adequately address the systematic discrimination women encounter at work as they frame women as 'the problem' to be fixed and fail to acknowledge, let alone challenge, the masculine model of work (de Vries et al., 2006). However female mentoring programmes have potential to empower (individual) women to challenge these barriers if they are designed to teach women ways to tackle discrimination and rework what it means to be successful in the workplace. Gender equity initiatives, such as women's mentoring programmes, can thus be understood as paradoxical: they can be empowering, even transformative for individual participants, yet also risky and dangerous practices for the same individuals, exposing them to accusations of weakness as they may be seen as in need of special treatment to get ahead in their careers. Acker (2000) argues that gender equity projects often fail to fully reach their goals, although they can show partial success, as they are fraught with contradiction and ambiguity, as the case study discussed below illustrates.

This paper considers the paradoxical nature of women's mentoring programmes that simultaneously make explicit aspects of gender inequality, such as shortage of women on boards, *and* sustain belief in gender neutrality of organisations. Discussion is based on a study of a mentoring programme that has the stated aim to empower women to 'be the best they can be' within the events industry. The programme is not premised on the need to 'fix' women so that they can fit into traditional masculinist structures, but rather to encourage mentees to understand their own goals and aspirations, and to imagine the type of worker, possibly leader, that they want to become. Led by a charismatic and high-profile woman in the industry, the programme thus offers an interesting case through which to question the extent to which such mentoring programmes can begin to challenge the status quo of business and rework the masculine model on which ideas of success are based. However, analysis of this programme illustrates the paradoxical nature of such equality programmes and just how ingrained the masculine norms of business and success are, as participants struggled to explicitly identify and thus challenge those norms, even though they were involved in a gender-friendly programme aimed at change.

The paper begins with an outline of the theoretical framework that guides the study, which is based around the concepts of paradox, gender neutrality and gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). After presenting details of the case study women's mentoring programme, interview data are used to consider various ways in which normative ideals of gender are both challenged and

reinforced within the scheme. The discussion and conclusion draw out the wider implications of this study for understanding the ways in which such programmes make gender visible within working practices and individual career trajectories, yet ensure that entrenched masculinist discourses and barriers to gender equality remain invisible, unacknowledged and, thus, largely unchallenged.

### **Theoretical framework**

Organisations are generally thought of as gender neutral and benign, with structures, jobs and working practices arranged to benefit the business and not influenced by gender. A wide body of organisational literature disputes this belief and illustrates the ways in which contemporary work and organisations are in fact gendered masculine (Acker, 1990; Hearn, 2000; Williams et al., 2012). Ideas of a successful worker, manager or leader are built around a masculine norm, with an uninterrupted career history and masculine traits, skills and behaviours such as decisiveness, independence and rationality. Workplace practices and arrangements are founded on this norm, and expectations of career success and decisions about progression are based around the ability of individual workers to embody this ideal. The ideal worker is thus often, although not necessarily, male; able and willing to give primacy to work before all else (Billing, 2011).

Gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained and widely shared and the characteristics of the ideal worker are not commonly associated with women (Heilman, 2001). It is far easier for men to embody the masculine traits, behaviours and practices associated with workplace success than it is for women. Women can indeed perform masculinity in the workplace – and many women believe it is necessary to distance themselves from a feminine identity at work as this is associated with caring, empathy and compassion, rather than achievement-oriented toughness (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Irvine & Vermilya, 2010) – but due to perceived incompatibility between their sex position as a woman and their enactment of masculinity, women's gender performances are often deemed less successful than those of men. Consequently women in business and leadership have long suffered sanction for being 'cold', 'bitchy' and unlikeable and their career successes are far less likely to be highly valued and directly attributed to their own behaviours than similar performances of men (Weyer, 2007).

Femininity is not always seen as undesirable at work, and feminine traits are valued in various jobs. In front-line service work feminine skills related to communication and emotional labour are often highly valued (Korczynski, 2002; Kerfoot & Korczynski, 2005; Pettinger, 2005). However, as Kelan (2008) argues, this does not necessarily mean that women benefit from this, as men are as good, if

not better, at profiting from the currency of femininity in specific workplace contexts. Men's performance of femininity in the workplace may be highly valued and rewarded, whereas women's similar performances may be dismissed simply as a 'natural' expression of womanhood (Taylor & Tyler, 2000). Consequently, individuals are continually doing gender in the workplace, and both men and women can 'do' both femininity and masculinity. It is the different value placed on these gender performances that can contribute to gender inequality, with men's performances of both masculinity and femininity usually more highly valued and perceived as more authentic than those of women. The rhetoric of success is thus gendered, positioning men and women differently in relation to ideas of what it means to be successful in work and organisational contexts.

Masculine discourses of success and business are so prevalent that their gendered attributes are virtually invisible (Bruni et al., 2004; Lewis, 2006; Kelan, 2009; Lui et al., 2015). Ideas of what it means to be an effective leader or a successful employee are so strongly masculine that they seem to be self-evident; this is just the way things are. Consequently individuals – male and female – frequently do not see the gendered structures of their work environment and insist that gender is not relevant and therefore gender discrimination cannot happen in their organisation (Kelan, 2009). Many people – men and women – perceive their workplaces to be gender egalitarian and organisational practices and policies are presented as benign and gender neutral, even when they actively marginalise women (Wood & Newton, 2006). This creates an ideological dilemma that Kelan (2009) calls 'gender fatigue'; workers recognise that gender discrimination occurs, yet claim that their own workplaces are gender neutral, "they are tired of seeing gender discrimination and prefer to see a world that is gender egalitarian, where gender no longer matters" (p.198). Gender discrimination is constructed as a thing of the past, or something that happens elsewhere. Gender neutrality appears progressive within such a post-feminist era, and gender is seen as having no place within business (Lewis, 2006). When gender discrimination does occur, and its consequences manifest visibly and undeniably, such examples tend to be individualised and compartmentalised as a specific isolated incident, rather than evidence of broader problems (Kelan, 2009).

Women's inability to embody the norms of the ideal worker and leader are thus understood as failings on the part of women and not on the gendered structures and discourses that marginalise women and advantage men. It is women that need 'fixing' to fit in with supposedly gender-neutral structures and practices, rather than those arrangements and norms themselves. The onus is thus placed on women in the workplace to adapt and improve so that their business performance will be more positively evaluated against the implicitly masculine norm. Mentoring is a function that women may engage with in order to achieve this goal.

## **Gender and mentoring**

Mentoring is a relationship between an experienced individual and a (usually) more junior person seeking “assistance, guidance and support for their career, personal and professional development” (Fowler et al., 2007, p.666). Mentoring is supposed to serve the dual purpose of assisting the mentee in relation to career (sponsorship, coaching, guidance etc.) and psychosocial functions (role modelling, friendship, confirmation etc.) (Chao, 1997; Kram, 1988). As a two-way reciprocal relationship, mentoring has been found to bring benefits to mentors as well as mentees (Levesque et al., 2005). Mentees experience improved career outcomes, such as pay, promotion and recognition, while mentors improve leadership skills, stay up to date with processes, and experience satisfaction in developing another (Forret et al., 1996). Mentoring thus has potential to empower women as both mentees and mentors within masculine organisational contexts.

However, although women may benefit from involvement in mentoring, there is wide evidence to suggest that women struggle to access mentoring networks much more than men do (Elliott et al., 2011). Mentoring can be both formal and informal, but women have less access to informal mentors due to gender patterns within organisations (Ragins & Cotton, 1991; O’Brien et al., 2008). For women to maximise the benefits from mentoring, the mentor needs to be part of the leadership elite of that sector or organisation and, as discussed above, the gendering of business and leadership ensures that effective mentors are more likely to be a recognised senior male (Ramaswami et al., 2010).

Women seeking out a mentor may struggle to find one informally who can support and champion them in their career and so may be more reliant on formal mentoring programmes than are men. Formal mentoring programmes provide structure and clarity to mentoring relationships but women-only programmes may risk reinforcing masculine domination in organisations by framing women as ‘the problem’ to be fixed through a formal initiative. Mentoring programmes that aim to ‘equip’ women to cope in male dominated environments like the boardroom, rather than to find their own voice and challenge the status quo, may actually serve to marginalise women further and reinforce the invisibly masculine discourses that sustain current practices (Oakley, 2000; de Vries et al., 2006).

Gender is done through mentoring, as it is through all other forms of social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 2010). As well as positioning women as ‘lacking’ in relation to the masculine norm of the ideal businessperson, mentoring may reinforce other gender stereotypes which marginalise women in the workplace. Female mentors have been found to provide greater

psychosocial support for mentees than do male mentors (O'Brien et al., 2008). This could be construed as positive, but in the masculine context of business and organisations, success is measured by rational, calculable outcomes more than by engagement in interpersonal support and guidance. Female mentors may thus be characterised as 'nurturing', more than dynamic and enterprising, and this may distance women further from the (masculine) ideal and more organisationally valued roles and work (Ollilainen & Calasanti, 2007). Conversely, male mentors are perceived to provide higher levels of career development support, which is usually more valued by both organisations and mentees seeking to advance in their careers (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Female mentors are expected to provide high levels of interpersonal support, as this is a supposedly 'natural' feminine trait, whereas male mentors who do this are marked out as offering something special and unexpected. If women fail to provide both strong interpersonal and career support they may be seen as poor mentors with weak leadership skills, whereas male mentors are usually judged primarily on their career support and sponsorship, with any social and personal support seen as a bonus. Mentoring thus carries risks for women that are less tangible for men.

The concept of paradox has proven useful as a way to think about gender in organisations, and has applicability to women's mentoring programmes. Within a paradox, two seemingly contradictory elements or situations can exist at the same time, exposing ambiguity and inconsistency and opening up potential for disruption and change through reflection on such uncertainties (Hearn, 1998; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009, 2014). The concept of paradox has been applied to various contexts, for example transparency in academic recruitment (van den Brink et al., 2010), women's position in the life sciences (van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009), and to analyse discourses of competence and gender deployed by female board members (Pesonen et al., 2009). In these and other cases, the concept of paradox has proven to be a useful heuristic device for thinking through ambiguity and contradiction, as well as resistance to and potential for change.

in the following sections of this paper the concepts of paradox, gender fatigue and gender neutrality are used to analyse a women's mentoring programme that aims to empower women as women, and to explore some of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in such an intervention framed against the backdrop of masculinist business settings.

## **Case study and methods**

The remaining sections of this paper are based on a case study of a sector-wide women's mentoring programme in the events industry. As an industry focused on communication and service, the events



industry could be perceived as a feminised domain, and indeed approximately 75% of workers in this sector are female. However, in common with other female-dominated fields women are concentrated in lower level positions and middle management. Despite an apparent focus on feminised traits such as communication, events is dominated by invisible masculine discourses that stress individualism, rationality and calculable outcomes (such as sales figures) (Benschop, 2009). The ideal worker is assertive, dynamic and committed to the job, involving long unpredictable hours and frequent travel; the ideal worker is based on implicit masculine norms (Dashper, 2013). Despite female numerical dominance, men dominate senior management and board-level positions, illustrating the persistence of the glass ceiling within the events industry.

The women's mentoring programme that is the focus of this study was designed, funded and championed by a female entrepreneur within the sector. Frustrated by the continued gender inequality she saw at the top of the industry she committed significant personal resources and exposed herself publicly to backlash within the industry by implementing a mentoring programme open only to female mentees from across the sector, at different stages of their careers, and with an explicit goal to tackle gendered barriers in the events industry. The programme was carefully designed and structured to offer mentors and mentees guidance and a framework for a productive mentoring relationship over the course of a year. This involved the provision of work materials, online support and face-to-face networking events.

A total of 15 mentors were paired with 15 mentees. Mentors were selected from the entrepreneur's personal network and include men and women with high status positions within the sector. There were 12 women and 3 men acting as mentors, with ages ranging from 32 to 60. All were in senior positions in the events industry, or a related sector such as hospitality, and included roles such as CEO, head of events and communications, and founder/owner of companies. The 15 mentees were selected through a competitive process. Applications were invited from women working in events at any stage of their career, and applicants had to state what they wanted to gain from the mentoring programme. The programme founder and mentor coach shortlisted applicants from a pool of 130, and provided each mentor with three potential mentees, based on the stated goals of the mentee and the experience and expertise of the mentor. Each mentor then conducted a telephone interview with their shortlisted mentees before selecting one who they felt they could support and build a working relationship with. The 15 selected mentees ranged from recent university graduates, to middle management and those seeking to break through into senior management, and included three business owners, with ages ranging from 22 to 45.

The programme is different from many other mentoring programmes in two key ways. First, being sector wide mentees are formally mentored by an individual outside of their organisation with no direct stake in their career progression, opening up possibility for frank and open discussions away from organisational politics. Second, the programme has been designed with explicitly gender-positive goals. The aims of the programme are not to coach women in relation to masculine traits and behaviours but to empower them to 'be the best they can be', the tagline of the scheme. The rationale for this mentoring programme is thus not to 'fix' women to make them better equipped to fit into masculine norms of business and leadership but to empower women to believe that they can do these things differently, if they want to. There is thus potential within this programme to open up ways of doing gender differently in business and organisational contexts.

The programme lasted for one year, and the research took place over the full length of this period. In addition to analysing the written documentation provided to mentors and mentees, I attended three development days as an observer, where I took notes and talked informally with participants involved in various activities aimed at helping them achieve their career goals. These days included talks from industry leaders, and individual and group activities involving both mentors and mentees. I conducted interviews with mentors and mentees at three stages in the programme in order to track changes in their attitudes and experiences: the first interview took place in the first two months of the programme, the second in month 6 or 7, and the third in the final month, or just after the programme finished. Participation in the research was voluntary, although I was provided with access to contacts and development days by the programme founder. In total I interviewed 14 of the 15 mentees and 13 of the 15 mentors. I spoke with 10 of the mentees three times, and four of them on two occasions. I interviewed nine of the mentors three times, one twice, and three on one occasion. I also interviewed the mentor coach, who designed the programme and supported the mentors, on one occasion, resulting in a total of 71 interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, and were conducted mostly by phone, although I had already met with all participants face to face at one of the development days prior to the interviews. The first set of interviews covered reasons for being involved in the programme, expectations and goals, previous experiences of mentoring and career histories. The second interviews tracked progress, development of goals, mentoring relationships and experiences on the programme. The final interviews covered overall experiences and relationships, progress towards goals, views on the programme, and future aspirations. Interviews were flexible to allow discussion of other relevant points.

All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed in full. Interview data, fieldnote observations and analysis of materials were thematically coded. Data were openly coded initially, and then subthemes emerged from this initial analysis as well as from the literature. For the purposes of this paper,

analysis focused on gendered experiences of work; understanding and relationship to the gendered aspects of the programme; and, expectations and experiences of involvement in the mentoring programme.

The following sections focus on the extent to which participants in this programme understand and buy into the rationale of the founding entrepreneur (who was also one of the 15 mentors), and how this reflects both acceptance and resistance to gendered discourses and rhetoric of success.

Identifying details have been omitted to protect anonymity. As interviews were conducted at three points it was possible to track any changes in attitude over the course of the year. The number given in brackets next to quotes indicates whether it comes from interview round 1, 2 or 3.

## **Findings**

The ways that both mentors and mentees talked about their understandings of the mentoring programme and their own role within it were ambiguous. All recognised the importance of taking measures to try to address gender discrimination in the events industry but were reluctant to identify such discrimination within their own companies or experiences, illustrative of the ideological dilemma of gender fatigue, described by Kelan (2009). They were positive about the programme, its goals and approach, and recognised that this is a way through which to begin to challenge some of the persistent masculine dominance of the industry, but were reluctant to fully embrace the legitimacy of the programme's gender-positive goals and identify themselves with alternative ways of doing business and leadership. Changes in attitude to the gender-positive focus of the programme were evident, and so the following sections are split into early perspectives (based on round 1 of interviews) and later perspectives (based on the third set of interviews).

### ***Early perspectives on the gender-positive focus of the mentoring programme***

This mentoring programme was initiated, designed and lead by one individual, the founding entrepreneur, who is highly successful and visible within the events industry. Consequently, her vision for the programme was important in directing the approach, tone and agenda. Although an increase in women in senior positions is a hoped-for long-term outcome, 'success' on the programme is broadly defined, as she explained:

*I think there's a big role to play with women showing other women that you can do stuff, you can be successful, whatever that might mean. It might be just that you want a family and that's what you want to do, or it might be that you want to get to the top of your business and I think that by other women showing women that that's possible it makes it possible for people who might not believe it can be done. (Founder, female, 1).*

She was keen to define success broadly and to stress the possibility of doing business differently:

*As I've got older and I've had children and I recognise that actually bringing people with you is much better than trampling on them, I think I've changed so much as a person, I've become so much more thoughtful with age and experience. I understand that you get the best out of people by working with them and so as a result of that I've tried to encourage a lot of women within my business, and to be a role model really, to show them that you can have kids, you can cycle a hundred miles, you can do all that stuff if you want to. (Founder, 1).*

Her vision is broad, and her goal is not just to teach women how to cope in masculinist business environments but to reimagine success according to their own life goals and priorities. The mentoring programme is explicitly defined as an initiative to support women and empower them to create their own definitions of success. All the participants recognised that such a programme can benefit women, and is needed given persistence of the glass ceiling within the events industry, but often relied on “stats” and business arguments to defend the need for a women-only programme, as did this mentee:

*When you look at the statistics about the industry and you know 75% of the industry is female but very few actually rise to the top, I think this is actually really important... something like this is a really important way of pushing people forward and I guess it's the confidence thing as well, it's making people feel they have space, that their opinions are valuable [Mentee, 1].*

The repetition of masculinist business arguments was a way to justify the opportunity being only open to female mentees and to align the programme and participants in relation to (masculine) business norms and expectations, as the explanation of this mentor illustrates:

*I believe that diversity is what brings balance, having different opinions, having different lenses on business as well, it just creates more innovation if you have a lot of different people contributing ideas and ways of doing things, inevitably I think it leverages performance and as a result of that profitability as well. I think looking at the stats it's*

*something like 75% of the events industry is women but very few of them are in leadership roles so there's definitely some untapped potential there [Mentor, female, 1].*

Some participants were more willing to identify the potential of the programme to empower women specifically as positive, and as something that they personally felt attracted to. This mentee identified the importance of seeing other women succeed as important for her own motivation:

*It [the programme] being just for women was definitely one of the main influences for why I wanted to get involved... all my managers are men and I don't feel like I've got any female role models or mentors to look up to in the company and yes, I guess it's a little bit frustrating when you don't see any women ahead of you to inspire and motivate you so yes, definitely, that was a massive part of why I wanted to get involved, and from the launch day, it was just really nice to see so many successful talented women, you know speaking on stage and [Founder] herself, just being in a room full of talented women that are paving the way, it's really exciting [Mentee, 1].*

The inclusion of a small number of men as mentors may help facilitate this goal by opening up the eyes of those men to the gendered experiences of women in the industry, as this mentor explained:

*I think it [the programme] really puts a magnifying glass on women in events and for that purpose alone I think it's fantastic. I mean when I think back to when I started in this industry, 80% of the people I worked with were women, I couldn't believe it, as a single man, it was a dream come true, but if I look at board level and I look at senior management it isn't that high and I think that's been incredible for me. I didn't notice that until [the programme] put a spot light on it... I've learned so much about female psychology and females in the workplace, it's been great [Mentor, male, 1].*

At the start, participants felt that the mentoring programme had potential to be inspiring, maybe even transformational for those involved, with wider effects on the broader industry. Although still constrained by the masculine normative discourses of business, the mentors and mentees hoped that the programme would have real effects for them personally and for the wider industry.

However, despite acknowledging the persistence of gender inequality within and beyond the events industry, many participants were reluctant to overtly state that action was needed to rectify this situation and that the programme could legitimately be defended on the basis of its goal to tackle gender inequality. Many participants' responses were characterised by ambiguity and inconsistency whereby they recognised gender inequality in business more broadly but were reluctant to acknowledge this within their own organisations or careers:

*I am a big one for equality and through my many years of experience I've seen just as many males who deserve a helping hand and possibly I think it's harder sometimes for men to reach out than it is for women, so I do believe there is a need to raise awareness, I do think there is a place for it, female mentoring is a very worthy thing to do but that's not to say that it wouldn't be just as beneficial to offer it to men too [Mentor, female, 1].*

This mentor felt uncomfortable with marking women out as 'different' and in special need of assistance to 'fix' them. There is indeed risk inherent in female-only programmes which may construct women as 'the problem' and fail to tackle the more insidious aspects of gender inequality in organisations (Oakley, 2000; de Vries et al., 2006). However, the mentor's response fails to recognise the gendered structures and discourses of the workplace that do position women differently to men and maybe do require specific focused interventions to begin to challenge this. It is potentially risky for women who have 'made it' within masculine organisational contexts to challenge those contexts too overtly and to draw attention to and question the gendered aspects of success. It is easier to accept that organisations and careers are indeed gender neutral and opportunities are equally available to all, in a truly meritocratic system, as expressed by this mentor:

*I don't think it [the programme] should be exclusively for women, I think that anybody who raises the profile of the industry, then that's great... I don't think there's a desperate need for women, I think it's great to get women on the agenda and to break that kind of old fashioned mould, but I think that it's more important that it's about our industry, really, I don't think it's about you being a man or a woman or whatever, I think it's just about you being good [Mentor, female, 1].*

Women often believe in the existence of meritocracy, despite evidence to the contrary (Lewis, 2006, Pesonen et al., 2009). Such responses are examples of gender fatigue wherein it is easier to believe in gender neutrality than to engage in the wholesale re-evaluation of the masculinist norms, discourses and practices that sustain male hegemony that would be necessary if the gendered nature of work and organisations was fully acknowledged and accepted (Kelan, 2009). This reflects the paradoxical nature of attitudes to gender inequality, and initiatives aiming to tackle it, as participants often acknowledged the value of supporting women in organisations, while simultaneously downplaying the need for interventions focused on overcoming discrimination and inequality.

Some of the participants in the study recognised gendered aspects of work, but only in relation to women and femininity, whereas men and masculinity remained unmarked. Women were

acknowledged to have distinctive characteristics, traits and attributes that are not fully consistent with concepts of the ideal worker and career, but these concepts were seen as gender neutral:

*We're a female dominated industry but actually at the senior level men dominate and I just don't think women are very good at pushing themselves forward, it's something that I know I have had to work on, well overcome and still work on, pushing ourselves forward for being the best person for the job when we're in a tender position, that sort of thing, so I think the programme helps overcome that barrier almost, you know you can do it, this is your progress path and now you've got the support of someone who's been there and done it to encourage you [Mentee, 1].*

Women were often seen as deficient in organisational contexts, primarily in relation to confidence and assertiveness in masculine settings. The onus was placed on women to rectify their deficiencies, and this programme was seen as one way to achieve this:

*I see it among friends and colleagues of my own, women have very different ways of working to men in the workplace so actually rather than shouting about needing change if you can tackle that with women and encourage them to be more confident and put themselves forward and for them to benefit from our [the mentors] experience and the things that we've seen then hopefully that encourages those stats to improve... I do think it starts with women because that's the easy thing to tackle [Mentor, female, 1].*

This mentor acknowledged that women and men may have different ways of working but she placed the responsibility on women to adapt to masculine models because “that’s the easy thing to tackle”. This may be true, as women are often identified as a problem in the workplace and are used to having to adapt to masculine practices (Ahl & Marlow, 2012), but it fails to challenge and begin to transform those practices to be ones that are truly more gender neutral.

The programme received wide coverage and attention within the industry, due primarily to the PR efforts of the founding entrepreneur. Whilst there was widespread support for and praise of the programme as a forward-thinking initiative to help the industry broadly, there was some backlash from senior male figures who questioned why it was open only to women and if this was not discrimination against men. The participants were aware of this criticism and some of the mentees clearly felt worried and intimidated by the responses of senior male figures:

*I think that it's [the programme] been perceived as positive, the only thing is that men want to be involved, they don't want to be side-lined, they want to be included too [Mentee, 1].*

*I did speak to one person who interestingly was a man who said ‘oh yeah I just looked at it and thought ‘oh it’s woman going on about being women again’’ and I think we have to be very careful not to isolate ourselves by it being women only [Mentee, 1].*

Senior male figures in the industry were voicing their concerns about men being left out and left behind, and some of the participants internalised these criticisms, failing to see that the gendered nature of work and organisations does not systematically marginalise men in the way that happens to women. Some felt that men would need their own assistance programmes:

*One of the guys I manage, I feel bad for him, there isn’t anything aimed at him, to push him forward, and there is that fear that we focus on women and then we do leave behind people like him who do want to move forward and who just happen to be men so they can’t be included in the mentoring scheme [Mentee, 1].*

Such responses are illustrative of the invisibility of masculine dominance and power where the inherent masculine bias in organisations goes unrecognised, yet exerts a powerful influence when action is taken to try to redress it. Acker (2000) argues that one reason that gender equity projects, like the mentoring programme in this study, fail is that “[g]ender equity necessarily redistributes power and rewards” (p.628). Those in positions of power and authority may lose out and so resist change, as happened in response to the gender-positive aspects of this mentoring programme. The founding entrepreneur was aware of these criticisms and was ready to respond:

*It’s not men who’ve got a 9.5% pay gap [sic] and it’s not men who are only 1 in 5 on boards and it’s not men who don’t get put forward in some organisations for promotions, so when it is men, then I’ll think about getting someone to do a programme for them [Founder, 1].*

Within this programme the influence of the founding entrepreneur was essential in getting the programme started, ensuring its success and the consistency of the message. She was committed to a gender-positive agenda and, despite criticism from some of her male industry peers, she defended her goal to focus on empowering women in the events industry.

### ***Developing perspectives***

If initially participants on the programme were ambivalent towards its gender-positive focus, many felt more able to articulate their support for this as the scheme progressed. In the third round of interviews I asked participants to comment on the extent to which they felt the programme had



contributed to achieving the aims of empowering women and advancing gender equality in the industry. Many mentors spoke broadly, but positively:

*I think it's a lovely step towards equality, certainly.* [Mentor, female, 3]

Whereas others spoke about the importance of the gender-positive focus to their own involvement in the programme, drawing on their personal life circumstances as motivation for their involvement:

*I'm ultimately very passionate about trying to ensure that people are rewarded fairly for what they put into their work, so that's my big drive. I've got a daughter, I want to make sure that the mentees in 20 years' time have done something to ensure that they're carrying this forward, so that's what ultimately strikes a chord with me, this is helping equality, ultimately, trying to promote, based on their abilities, and I feel that females are hampered in the workplace in that respect by the structure in place, so that's what's really important for me and I think as a man it would be easy to shy away from that because maybe the system benefits you more, but that's not necessarily how I view it* (Mentor, male, 3).

Many of the mentees spoke about feeling more empowered personally, as a result of their involvement on the scheme, as expressed by this mentee:

*for me personally I definitely feel a lot more empowered and brave and bold about the things that I want to achieve, both in the immediate future and across my career, I think I've definitely got that from being on this scheme, I think it's, it has been really nice to be part of this thing that's been championing women* [Mentee, 3].

Several mentioned the importance of a strong female role model, in the figure of the founding entrepreneur, in inspiring them and making them feel more confident in their professional selves:

*it's all about empowering and believing in yourself and not taking any crap! (laughs) but also just getting out there and doing it and I think having [Founder] as the face of [the programme] has definitely helped that as well cos she's such a strong-minded, passionate and really inspirational person, having her up in front of you telling you how you can make it and how you can be successful if you want to do well, you want to prove to [Founder] that you can do it! So I think in terms of who set the scheme up and empowering women and all the rest of it, she's an absolute ambassador for that which I think has really helped* [Mentee, 3].

However, although many participants discussed the gender-positive focus of the programme more openly and favourably than at the beginning, many still appeared ambivalent about the legitimacy of a women-focused initiative. Driven by belief in gender neutrality in the workplace, and the perceived inappropriateness of overtly drawing attention to and trying to address gender inequality, many reverted to a rhetoric of gender-blindness and the need to ensure men do not feel excluded and threatened by interventions focused on female advancement:

*it's good that we're not pushing men out and making it this women only, we're going to take over the world thing, because we've got male mentors, so it's evident that we're not doing that and it's not a sexist programme, but I think that's important in the empowering women thing that it's not at the cost of pushing men out, if that makes sense, we should be doing it together, we should be working towards things together with men as well, it's not just females on our own, if that makes sense? [Mentee, 3]*

Male support and authorisation was seen by many of the mentees in particular as important for ensuring the programme was seen as legitimate. Keen not to be seen as involved in something 'sexist', because of its female focus, male support appeared to some to make the programme acceptable and worthwhile:

*I think one thing that's really obvious is that when we have our big group meetings and you have some really strong, influential men in the room that are completely on your side and are supportive of the programme, and I think that shows the empowerment of women through it, because you can have a room full of women and we can just get on with it but if you've also got men in there that are completely supporting it, I think it really shows that it's got substance, and as much as it is completely women, I don't feel that there's any sort of element of, you know, chauvinistic behaviour there at all because people just get on with it and really enjoy the atmosphere [Mentee, 3].*

As mentioned above, the women-only focus of the programme did draw criticism from some men in the industry, who responded vocally and negatively to the scheme. This included a panel discussion at an industry event, titled, 'Are female mentoring schemes sexist?' Mentees were very aware of this criticism, and their defensive responses are illustrative of their relative powerlessness in relation to these influential and vocal male critics.

The power of such critique has less sway over the mentors, who have already 'made it' in the industry so are less dependent on the support and patronage of senior men. As the programme progressed, some of the mentors felt that the gender-positive focus had not been articulated

strongly enough, and that an opportunity had been lost to really challenge such views and the masculinist domination of the industry:

*I think absolutely in the beginning we made a real splash, I think we've missed the opportunity to keep making a splash ... we've got a spotlight on the problem [gender inequality], and the more we can spotlight, highlight the problem, the more we can look at ways to solve the problem, then we're doing a lot more than just looking after 15 girls, then we really are trying to make a difference in our community, in our industry, in our niche, and that's something I was excited about at the beginning because we were in all the magazines, there was a sort of 'wow, look what they're doing!' and now, besides the 5 month update, that's been it [Mentor, male, 2].*

Initial media interest in the programme, and its gender-positive focus, had sparked debate, some of which had been critical. However, it had brought gender inequality and discrimination to the forefront of industry debates in a way not seen before. As the programme progressed, this interest waned and so gender issues once more slipped into the background with more focus given instead to the career development outcomes for the individual mentees, reducing the potential impact the programme could have on the wider industry. This is a common occurrence in gender equity programmes: gender slips out of focus in favour of more business-oriented outcomes, limiting potential for change (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). To keep gender inequality in focus and to drive discussion, action and ultimately change, would require concerted effort by the founder, mentors and mentees, and this is not without risk, as recognised by this mentor:

*I think the problem is that we're not vocal enough and strong enough in saying 'actually, this is something'; even [Founder] isn't, and there's a lot of shyness of the 'I'm not the burn your bra type', it's an apologetic approach, I guess because it's the only way to get support, in the media etc., is to play it down a little bit and say 'we're only trying to redress the balance blah, blah, blah'. I think [Founder]'s as strong as she can be given the fact that she's also running a business that requires men to contract with her ... she's incredibly brave making that stand when she's got a company, and you're ultimately going to have a client saying they don't want to work with you if they don't agree with you and people can be very vociferous about this subject, but it would be better if we were just more vocal that this is not right and more people, more initiatives need to happen. [Mentor, female, 3]*

For women to speak out about gender inequality is a risk, as it exposes them to backlash and fierce critique, as occurred in relation to this programme. For women in business, these risks may have

material consequences in terms of loss of business, isolation and stunted career progression. Consequently for all the women involved in the programme – the founder, the mentors and mentees – there are risks in foregrounding the gender-positive aspects too strongly. The downplaying of this focus reduces the risks they face, illustrative of the continued influence of gendered discourses of success and power. In a supposedly post-feminist environment where gender plays little role in business, the risks of drawing attention to ongoing discrimination and inequality are substantial and contribute to the pervasive attitude of gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009). These issues are discussed further in the next section.

## **Discussion**

The mentoring programme discussed in this paper is built on beliefs that women are systematically marginalised within the workplace and that action is needed to change this. The programme aims to empower women in relation to their own careers, to rethink notions of success, effective leadership and career. The individual mentees involved in the scheme all experienced beneficial outcomes in terms of confidence, improved networking abilities and more focused career planning, leading to a number of promotions, new jobs and even a new business (see Dashper, 2018). For these 15 women the programme was empowering and successful, but the extent to which this reaches beyond their own personal careers and contributes towards tackling gender discrimination more broadly is less certain.

The ambivalent, often contradictory comments of mentors and mentees involved in this programme illustrate the invisibility of gender inequality in everyday working practices, and the difficulties of identifying and thus tackling discrimination. The responses presented above demonstrate the pervasive attitude of gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009), whereby participants recognise that gender inequality can occur, but are reluctant to identify this in their own organisations and experiences. It was impossible for participants in this mentoring programme not to acknowledge the persistence of some degree of gender inequality and discrimination, as this was an explicit rationale for the programme and was clearly articulated by the founder and in all documentation. However, many participants were reluctant to identify tackling gender discrimination as a legitimate reason for the women-only focus of the programme, citing the support of senior men in industry as a form of authorisation for the current scheme. This, coupled with frequent assurances that the female-focus was not 'sexist' and that men also need and deserve career support, repositioned participants as members of a career development and mentoring programme more broadly, rather than as associated with a project directly focused on tackling inequality. Gender invisibility is the dominant

position in business (Lewis, 2006), and those who wish to be seen as successful and legitimate in industry circles generally accept this and play down the importance of gender at individual and organisational levels. Programmes like the mentoring scheme discussed in this paper disrupt this, bringing gender to the fore, and so participants realign themselves with dominant gender-neutral business discourses by distancing from and downplaying the salience of gender to their involvement and experiences of the scheme.

The programme thus makes gender visible, but the responses of participants illustrate that the workings of masculine power remain largely invisible, illustrative of a paradox in gender equity programmes and initiatives. It is women and femininity that have been made conspicuous and this risks framing women as 'the problem' within organisational contexts. Women and femininity are still positioned as lacking in relation to the supposedly gender neutral norm, and in need of intervention to 'fix' them. At times some of the participants in the programme did acknowledge gender inequality but ascribed the causes of that inequality to women themselves, rather than to the dominance of masculinist discourses that marginalise and make it virtually impossible for women to embody the invisibly masculine ideal. It then becomes the responsibility of women, individually and collectively, to change this, to learn new ways of fitting in, becoming more confident and adapting to the business environment. That this business environment is based on masculine norms remains invisible, and unchallenged. Accepting that women are deficient in the masculine workplace and need to work on themselves and improve their ability to fit in, most participants are reproducing the normative gender order that sustains masculine hegemony within and beyond the workplace. The mentees may learn coping strategies and improve their ability to operate within masculine workspaces, but this will not fundamentally change or challenge those workplaces to make them more gender egalitarian. The gendered discourses of success that position women as 'other' and somehow lacking are not exposed, let alone challenged, and responsibility is placed on women to find ways to fit in and live up to the supposedly gender neutral rhetoric of success.

The longitudinal design of the study enabled changes in attitudes towards the gender-positive focus of the mentoring programme to be monitored. By the end of the year-long scheme, many of the mentees did feel more confident to claim the positive and empowering aspects of having a programme focused on women supporting women, and identified the inspirational role model set by the Founder, as well as some of the other participants. Some of the mentors expressed frustration that the gender-positive focus had not been made more prominent, and thus sparked greater debate and, potentially, action to address persistent gender inequality in the industry. However, it is perhaps not surprising that this more radical potential of the programme was not realised. The risks for women (and sometimes men) of explicitly challenging the gender-blindness of business and

drawing attention to ongoing discrimination are considerable. The backlash against the programme from a few vocal but powerful industry figures had the effect of constraining, if not silencing, those who may want to champion the women-only focus and the need for action to tackle gender inequality. Even within a programme with explicitly gender-positive goals, with a stated aim to empower women and begin to confront gender discrimination, participants were reluctant to identify overtly gender inequality as something that is still occurring within their sector, organisation and personal experiences. The masculine discourses of success and the rhetoric of gender neutrality are so ingrained that it is difficult to recognise and challenge continued inequality and discrimination.

## **Conclusions**

Initiatives such as the women's mentoring programme discussed in this paper, and other projects focused on enabling women in business, play an important role in empowering individual women and supporting them in their career development. This can be transformative on an individual level, and those women may go on to influence others within and beyond their own organisations. This is important, however it does not address the dominance of masculine discourses of success that sustain gender inequality. Organisations have responsibility to do more than just support individual employees on training and development initiatives, and must also monitor and modify their practices to promote and enable greater gender equality (Adamson et al., 2016), trying to broaden ideas of 'success' to encompass different roles and workplace performances. Cultural expectations about gender-appropriate behaviour and roles within and outside of work need to be challenged, for both women and men (Friedman, 2015). Mentoring and other career development initiatives have an important role to play, but need to be underpinned by more far-reaching and systematic changes. The mentoring scheme discussed in this paper illustrates just how ingrained and invisible masculine norms and discourses of success are, and how difficult it is to challenge those norms, despite a specific programme aimed at change.

This paper contributes to understanding of gender and organisations in three ways. First, the examples discussed here illustrate the pervasiveness of gender fatigue in people's attitudes to gender inequality in the workplace (Kelan, 2009). Despite being enrolled (as mentor or mentee) on a programme aimed explicitly at drawing attention to and beginning to tackle gender discrimination, participants were reluctant to accept this as sufficient rationale for a women-only initiative. Recourse to masculinist discourses of the business benefits of proactively managing diversity, as well as drawing on support from senior men, enabled participants to justify the existence of the

programme, without foregrounding gender and the need for action to redress continued discrimination. Such is the dominance of the rhetoric of gender neutrality that it becomes difficult for many to recognise, let alone begin to challenge, discrimination and inequality in their own experiences and organisations. Rather, as Kelan (2009) argues, it appears more progressive and business-like to be gender-blind, believing in meritocracy rather than recognising persistent discrimination.

Second, this paper illustrates the riskiness of acknowledging gender inequality in the workplace for women at different stages in their careers. The ambiguity with which both mentors and mentees discussed the gender-positive goals of the mentoring programme, and their eagerness to ensure that men would not feel 'left out', indicates insecurity in relation to their own position as women in masculinist organisations, and the risks of pointing out their femaleness for their own career progression. Most mentees mentioned with trepidation the vocal and negative backlash from a small number of high profile men in the sector in relation to the female focus of the mentoring programme, indicative of the ongoing power of male elites to define the terms of debate within the industry, and to disempower attempts to acknowledge and tackle ongoing gender inequality.

Third, this paper illustrates some of the limitations of mentoring programmes and other management initiatives for tackling deep-rooted gender inequality, and the discourses which sustain it. Gender is made explicit within such initiatives, and gender inequality is acknowledged to exist and to need rectifying. However, the individualist focus of mentoring and other leadership development initiatives ensures that the more pervasive and insidious aspects of gender inequality that profoundly shape experiences of work and organisations remain unacknowledged. This highlights a paradox at the heart of such gender equity projects: systemic inequality is acknowledged and in need of action to rectify, but the causes of this inequality are individualised and depoliticised. Even within a programme designed to address inequality and discrimination, masculine norms and discourses of success remain largely invisible and thus unchallenged.

Within a masculinist organisational context programmes such as the women's mentoring scheme discussed in this paper do begin to challenge the status quo by drawing attention to the continued importance of gender discrimination and inequality in the professional lives of women (and men). However, they do not radically alter the entrenched gendered discourses and practices which continue to marginalise women and feminine identities.

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